

A preliminary railroad survey in Wisconsin, 1857

Andrew McFarland Davis, A. M. From a photograph taken in 1910.

[Separate No. 141] A Preliminary Railroad Survey in Wisconsin, 1857 By Andrew McFarland Davis, A. M. [From the Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for 1910 pages 165—170] Madison Published by the Society 1911 Copy 2

F586 .D26 Copy 2 J. F. Jameson

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Early Railroad Survey A Preliminary Railroad Survey in Wisconsin, 1857 By Andrew McFarland Davis, A.M.1

1 Mr. Davis kindly sent to the Editor a transcript of the diary he kept during his surveying experiences in Wisconsin. With his permission, we have abbreviated the narrative to a considerable extent, and frequently compressed the experiences of several days into a single paragraph; because of this, the language here given is not always that of the author. It is thought, however, that no important incident has been omitted from Mr. Davis's diary. The accompanying map was traced with the aid of the diary, which for a large part of the distance gives the location of each night's camp by its sectional position.— Ed.

E. W. F. Nov. 9-11

I began my surveying experiences in 1856, in the employ of the Mobile & Ohio Railroad; but when, the following spring, their affairs were in confusion, I sought other employment. Coming north to Chicago, the La Crosse & Milwaukee Railroad engaged me to join an expedition for a preliminary survey of a line from Portage to the foot of Lake Pepin. Thomas Daniels was the chief of the party, with A. Cleveland in charge of the compass, and I of the level.

After a few days at Milwaukee, spent in examining and tracing township maps, the party was thoroughly organized and arrived at Portage on Saturday, April 25. During that night it snowed, so that it was not until the following Wednesday that we went into our first camp, near Silver Lake. The next day we began work, and found our progress slow, owing to marshes and heavy rains. By Sunday we were encamped on Fox River, and next day reached a point on the Packwaukee road.

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From there we advanced to the neighborhood of Westfield;² and our ninth camp, near Wood's Lake, was in a very attractive situation on the shore of a lovely little body of water, clear as crystal, entirely encircled by hills.³

² The surveying party moved nearly northward from Portage into Marquette County, not far from the line of the present Portage-Stevens Point division of the Wisconsin Central Railway. Westfield is now a station on that road, and was platted in 1856 for the first settlers, the Cochrane Brothers, who had already been at this point for seven years.— Ed.
³ Wood Lake lies in the northwestern corner of Marquette County, not far from the line of the railway aforesaid.— Ed.

May 12, we had advanced, to Deer Creek,⁴ where the sandy soil was black with charcoal from recent fires. Four days later our line entered a great marsh, interspersed with occasional strips of solid ground. There we worked for several days, frequently thinking that we had at last reached the main land, only to be disappointed. The water was, on an average, two to three feet deep, and wading from morning till night, with only an occasional respite, was exhausting work. The first day, our midday meal was taken on Roche à Cri Creek,⁵ on whose opposite shore high, rocky bluffs rose out of the marsh. That evening we cached our tools and started for Saratoga, where we were to camp.⁶ After wandering about for some time in high brush, we concluded that we were lost, so stopped, made some bough shelters, built a fire, and lay down for the night on the bare ground. I myself was too cold to sleep. At early dawn, we started again to hunt up our lost camp. After about an hour we met our commissary, and had our supper and breakfast in

one meal. This loss of our way, we attributed to the defective maps we were obliged to use.

4 Deer Creek is an affluent of Mekan River, which discharges into the Fox just above Lake Puckaway. The upper waters of Deer Creek approach the vicinity of Wood Lake.— Ed. 5 After leaving camp on Deer Creek, the surveying party crossed the southwest corner of Waushara County, and proceeded in a northwesterly direction through Adams. Roche à Cri means the shouting (or whooping) rock. The origin of the term is unknown. Two affluents of the Wisconsin bear this name, Big and Little Roche à Cri creeks, and lie entirely within Adams County.— Ed. 6 Saratoga is an extinct village in southeastern Wood County, in a township of the same name. The early settlement was largely of Irish extraction, and the present population is entirely rural.— Ed.

Map of Railroad Survey described by Mr. Davis

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Wednesday, we got out of the marsh, and coming to the improvised camp of the night in the open, found that the fire had spread a long distance into the woods. May 22, we reached the banks of Wisconsin River,⁷ and next day carried the line across that stream, through several tamarack swamps, and on to a flat prairie which gradually changed into a marsh, with a surface of matted cranberry roots floating on a miry bed of indeterminate depth. During our work in the cranberry marsh, we became separated from our supplies, and had to sleep in an old shingle shanty. One day we had no food, save some hard bread left from the day before. Not until reaching camp No. 15, on the banks of Yellow River, did we join our equipment from which we had been separated for four days.⁸ We were much impressed by the splendid forests of this region.

⁷ The camp on Wisconsin River was not far below Pointe Bas, in the neighborhood of the present Port Edwards.— Ed. ⁸ The Yellow River camp seems to have been not far from the present settlement of Pittsfield, Wood County— Ed.

Starting out on the morning of May 30, we expected to push right through to Black River. It rained hard in the afternoon, and all day long our work was in a tremendous windfall, where it was impossible for me, with the instrument, to get a sight for more than a few yards at a time. Fearful that the rivers might rise and detain us, we pushed on the next

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day, cut a road for the teams, forded both the Yellow and Little Yellow, and established camp No. 16 on the farther bank of the latter.

June 1 opened with a hard rain, but after a time it ceased, and we began to run the line. At first, it lay over another great windfall, but finally opened out upon a beautifully-wooded country, where we again lost our bearings, while seeking camp. We took the blazed trail leading to Stevens Point, and after awhile heard cattle-bells. These proved to belong to a log cabin, where, after firing a pistol to awaken the inmates, we were hospitably entertained and slept comfortably on wolves' skins spread upon the floor. Another day, one of our party went hunting, and was missing for two days; he at last came in, haggard and worn out, after a hard tramp.

The mosquitoes grew very troublesome early in June. This feature of the summer's experiences is indelibly impressed upon my memory. Those using the instruments, were especially exposed to the assaults of these insects. All others, including even the axemen, could protect themselves with veils and gloves, or start smudges and cower in the smoke. The use of a veil was not consistent with sighting through a telescope, neither could one manipulate the screws of an instrument with hands encased in gloves. Hence the compass-man of the party and I had probably a better conception of the number of these pests and their voracity, that summer, than any other members of the party. Fortunately, the period of their abundance did not last long. While they did prevail, however, they hovered about us in clouds, and were perfectly ravenous.

June 9, our flagman and some new hands whom we had acquired, gave out because of the insects and left for camp in the early part of the day. We were obliged to camp in the woods, however, and our discomfort was so great that we were early at work. After securing several new hands, we went on for nearly two weeks along the general line of Yellow River.

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Monday, June 22, we each took three meals in our packs, had the remainder of the flour baked into biscuits, and with some blankets and a light fly-tent packed on a small mare, started for Black River.⁹ While passing around a swamp, the mare became separated from us, and it was night of the second day before Mr. Daniels arrived with the equipment. We expected to get through, that night, to Eaton's Mill, on Black River,¹⁰ but a heavy thunderstorm coming up, we pitched our tents and crawled under the fly in a hurry. In the course of the night the water rose and put out our fires and filled the low spots to the depth of two to three inches. We had nothing but tea and sassafras leaves for breakfast. At noon, Cleveland produced a sardine box, and a fish apiece made our dinner.

⁹ The party was passing in a northwesterly direction from Wood into Clark County, expecting to reach Black River not far from the geographical centre of the latter county.—Ed. ¹⁰ The first settlement on Black River, within the present county of Clark, was made in 1848 at the site of Neillsville. During the same year, Van Dusen & Waterman built a mill eighteen miles higher up, at the site of the present village of Greenwood. This mill was purchased within a year or two after its construction, by Elijah Eaton, who became the founder of the settlement known as Eaton's Mills, or Eatonville. In 1867 it was laid out as a town, under the name of Greenwood. Elijah Eaton himself died Dec. 4, 1872.—Ed. 169

We busied ourselves as well as our strength would permit, splitting wood for fires and peeling bark to place between our blankets and the damp ground. Thursday morning, June 25, all hands looked haggard and felt weak. About noon I made an unsuccessful search for a section line, and soon after took a compass and started with several others in the direction in which we supposed Eaton's Mill to lie. A few remained in camp. We soon heard a hail, and returned to find that Eaton and his man had arrived with food. Daniels had been caught in a swamp, and only reached the mill on Wednesday. The distance proved fourteen instead of eight miles, and the relief party that had left on Wednesday night had not arrived until Thursday noon.

We devoured all the bread at one meal, and made a supper from pork and greens. The next morning we were nearly as hungry as before; but at about half-past eight were happily surprised to see Mr. Daniels and his party appear with packs on their backs. We

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ate most of the bread they brought, and then started out to blaze a trail to the point where we expected the wagons, and son were again in touch with our supplies.

June 30, the mosquitoes and gnats were so bad that it was practically impossible to work, and we camped on Rock River, along whose branches we had been working. The next day we reached the long-sought Eaton's Mill. Black River was very beautiful, fringed to the edge with fine trees. We celebrated July 4 by running a line that at night touched Eau Claire River. Thence we kept on nearly west, crossing several forks of the same stream, until by the 17th we had crossed the ridge to the headwaters of Paint Creek.¹¹ Next day we came upon a patch of line that had originally been run in winter. The trees were blazed six or eight feet from the ground, and the level-pegs were eighteen inches or two feet high, all indicating that when the line was run, snow lay on the ground. At Chippewa Falls, a brisk new town, we found letters directing us to change our terminus from Lake Pepin to Hay River.¹² In accordance with these new 11 The surveyors had crossed the northeastern corner of Eau Claire County, and entered the southern tier of townships in Chippewa County. Paint Creek is an affluent of Chippewa River. Previous to crossing the ridge aforementioned, the party had been on the upper waters of Eau Claire River.— Ed. 12 Hay River is an important affluent of Red Cedar, entering the later some twenty miles above Menomonie, in Dunn County.— Ed. 170 instructions, we reached Chippewa river just opposite the site of Frenchtown.¹³ Thence we worked west, chiefly in swampy land, camping one night on Trout Run, where our fishermen found much enjoyment.

13 Frenchtown was a small cluster of houses just below Chippewa City P. O.— Ed.

Camp No. 45 was on the banks of Elk Creek, whence we reached the headwaters of Red Cedar River, and made connections with a surveying party under charge of Mr. Brewer, who had been working from the other end of the line to meet us.

Tuesday, August 4, all hands walked to Eau Claire, dined, and started in a keelboat down the Chippewa. At night I slept wrapped up in my blanket, in imminent danger of rolling off into the water, on the ledge of the boat where men stood to pole.

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About four o'clock the next afternoon we reached Reed's Landing, on the Mississippi.¹⁴ Thence, having embarked on a steamer, we arrived at Prairie du Chien in the morning of August 7, and took the train for Milwaukee, whence we had set out fifteen weeks before.

¹⁴ For Reed's Landing, on the Mississippi, see Wis. Hist. Soc. *Proceedings*, 1906, p. 253. — Ed.

Our experiences had nothing in them of excitement or adventure. Their discomforts were such as are undergone by every hunter and fisherman who goes into the woods at that season of the year. We saw many partridges and pigeons, and now and then a deer, but a large party tramping along without attempt to suppress noise, would not be liable to encounter much game. We saw but few snakes until we reached the district of Elk Creek, when a variety of prairie rattlers were abundant; at one camp on that creek, nine were killed. We saw no elk, but did see numerous antlers, shed by the bucks, lying on the ground near our line.

The fresh air, the out-of-door life, the beautiful lakes, lovely praires, splendid forests, and sparkling creeks among the hills, the broad rivers lined with stately trees in the valleys—all these impressed my imagination, and have always remained in my mind as a picture of Wisconsin's beauty and resources. This picture has made the memory of my surveying experiences a pleasant one, in spite of our physical discomforts and occasional hardships.